

**“The Memory of the Landscape”:
An Ecocritical Analysis of Seamus Heaney’s Bog Poems**



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Introduction

What is the relation between the poet and nature? How is the *inspired* linked to this natural *inspiration*? These are among the questions that brought forth the creation of Ecological Criticism, or ecocriticism, a theory of analysis that examines this very relationship. Yet, the recent concept of ecocriticism has changed over the years. Steven Rosendale puts it most concisely: “Environmental literary criticism is at something of a crossroads.”¹ What was once used strictly to study nature writing—writing that asserts the intrinsic value of *the* environment—now applies to literature that provides a much wider definition of *environment*. Today, ecocriticism reaches well beyond the confines of nature writing and analyzes a wide range of literature whose definition of environment is rural and urban, wild and cultivated, nonhuman and human.² This last distinction is perhaps the most crucial in understanding an author’s treatment of the land, for traditional nature writing, which served as the original subject and progenitor of the ecocriticism movement, defines the environment in its own terms—necessarily non-anthropocentric.

Yet, one study suggests “all ecological criticism shares the fundamental premise that human culture is connected to the physical world, affecting it and affected by it.”³ A subsequent work by Karla Armbuster and Kathleen R. Wallace, aptly titled *Beyond Nature Writing*, demonstrates that “understanding nature and culture as interwoven rather than as separate sides of a dualistic construct” becomes the necessary prerequisite for

¹ *The Greening of Literary Scholarship: Literature, Theory, and the Environment*. Steven Rosendale, ed. (Iowa City: U of Iowa P, 2002).

² For a more thorough discussion of ecocriticism as it applies to nature writing, see Lawrence Buell’s *The Environmental Imagination: Thoreau, Nature Writing, and the Formation of American Culture* (Cambridge: Harvard UP, 1995).

³ *The Ecocriticism Reader: Landmarks in Literary Ecology*. Harold Fromm & Cheryl Glotfelty, eds. (Athens: U Georgia P, 1996).

expanding beyond nature writing and exploring any author's treatment of an environment that may only appear to be framing or peripheral.⁴ Armbruster and Wallace's collection of essays proves that ecocriticism successfully applies to a range of literature and variety of definitions of environment, an application that is necessary because "a continued focus on nature and wilderness writing within ecocriticism might reinforce this same nature-culture dualism while, this time, privileging nature over culture."⁵

As the application of ecocriticism expands, this gap between nature and culture narrows. What were once seen as two isolated elements become closely tied when viewed through the lens of an ecocritic. Perhaps this is the goal of the ecocritic, or perhaps it is the ambition of the poet. Seamus Heaney argues in "The Sense of Place" that poetry is produced by two senses of place, the "lived, illiterate and unconscious" that is nature and the "learned, literate and conscious" that is culture.⁶ Great literary creators, such as Yeats, Kavanaugh, Synge, or Montague, Heaney asserts, produce works that are influenced by aspects of nature that contribute to their respective cultures. Likewise, their works in turn evoke images of nature and senses of the surrounding culture. Through the poetry, nature and culture are necessarily linked.

The simultaneous duality and conflation of nature and culture is especially evident in Heaney's own poetry. The complex relationship between the two key elements emerges with particular potency in Heaney's famous Bog Poems. While some scholarship on Heaney's poems draw upon this collection, few scholars have focused entirely on the Bog Poems, instead using them to illustrate points regarding Heaney's use

⁴ *Beyond Nature Writing: Expanding the Boundaries of Ecocriticism*. Karla Armbruster & Kathleen R. Wallace, eds. (Charlottesville: U of Virginia P, 2001) 4.

⁵ *Ibid.* 4.

⁶ Heaney, Seamus. "The Sense of Place." *Preoccupations: Selected Prose 1968-1978*. (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1980) 131.

of language, politics, or other themes. However, these poems deserve their own analysis. Heaney's choice of place for these poems serves as a crucial point through which Irish culture surfaces. It is through the location—the bog—that Heaney produces “history and mystery”⁷ that lend to the reader's construction of an actual and imagined culture. And like nature and culture, two seemingly contrasting elements that come together through poetry, Heaney brings together history and mystery, through the voices he gives the land.

One of the main inspirations for Heaney's Bog Poems was the book *The Bog People* (1969) by P.V. Glob. Upon discovering this source, Heaney was fascinated by the stories, and especially pictures, of the preserved bodies that had been unearthed in Danish bogs. In the nineteen fifties, a body was found in a bog in Tollund, Denmark, and Glob was called to the site. The body was determined to be from the Iron Age, and the body itself was more than 2,000 years old. Due to the high acidic and oxygen-free nature of the bogs, bacteria and fungi cannot survive, and thus objects that would normally decompose are instead preserved like specimens in jars of formaldehyde. Two years later, a second body was found in Grauballe, Denmark, only a few miles from Tollund. This body dated to 310 A.D. Besides the age and remarkable preservation of the bodies (even fingerprints could still be read), what interested many of the onlookers and those who studied the bodies was the apparent means of death: violent sacrifice. The Tollund Man, as he is now known, was hanged and then thrown into the bog; the Grauballe Man's throat was slit from ear to ear before being thrown into the bog.

As Glob writes in his work, and Anne Ross and Don Robins state in their analysis of other bog bodies in *The Life and Death of a Druid Prince* (1990), the sacrifices were

⁷ Heaney describes words as “bearers of history and mystery” in his essay “Feeling into Words” from *Preoccupations: Selected Prose 1968-1978*. (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1980) 45.

made to Nerthus, the Norse goddess of earth and fertility. From this conflation of land and religion, one can see the emerging association of nature and culture, an association that presumably dates back to the Iron Age. With this relationship between land and religion in mind, it comes as no surprise that Heaney, raised near a bog in Northern Ireland (the source of both religious and cultural strife in Ireland), naturally related the stories to his own experiences with the bog, illuminating a nature-culture relationship that exists today. At the time of publication of Glob's book, 1969, the "Troubles" of Ulster intensified, and Heaney's reading of one culture of long ago easily translated to culture of Ireland today. For Heaney, the parallel was drawn between two gendered lands—female goddess Nerthus of Denmark and traditional female Mother Ireland, Kathleen Ni Houlihan, and the sacrifices made to each—Danes as a rite to maintain order and as a part of religion, Irish as a means to restore order and largely as a response to religion. Where today it seems as if the clever poet creates this nature-culture relationship, in fact the nature-culture mingling as evidenced in history informs and inspires the poet.

In his first Bog Poem "Bogland," Heaney developed the idea of the bog as "the frontier" of Ireland, a part of nature that contributed to the distinctiveness of the Irish culture. Yet, unlike the frontier that held promise of the future, Heaney's bog gave definition to the past. The bog is one of the defining natural places and phenomena in Ireland. Covering nearly one-sixth of Ireland's landmass, "bog" refers to vast, wet, spongy areas of decaying peat moss. These areas have always been a crucial element of Irish culture, from the pre-bog days of lakes, when human communities grew around the water-hole, to today, when post-lake bogs are farmed by turfcutters and designated as a

distinguishing part of Irish culture, even forming such tourist destinations as the *Kerry Bog Village*.⁸

Later Heaney explored the bog in several poems, drawing directly from Glob's work while contributing elements of Irish landscape and culture. In relation to Glob's work, and identifying with the Danish tradition, the Irish bog history for Heaney becomes part of a universal system and pattern of cultures that involved the bog. However, Heaney also used the Irish bog to give Ireland and its history a distinct identity. Heaney used the bog, as distinguished from the defining landscapes of other countries, to set Ireland apart. Heaney's first use of the bog in poetry arose as a response to America's defining landscape, the "frontier." "We have no prairies," Heaney asserts in "Bogland," but we do have bogs. In "Bogland," the final poem in Heaney's *Door into the Dark* collection (1969), Heaney invokes this identity, and lays out elements of the bog that become important to the ensuing Bog Poems, found in *Wintering Out* and *North*. The "wet centre" of the Irish landscape is "bottomless," and "Every layer they strip / Seems camped on before." Patrick Rafroidi explains Heaney's intention here: "The Irish landscape, particularly if compared to the American one as sung by Theodore Roethke, is limited horizontally on the surface, but not vertically in depth, for there is the bog."⁹ As opposed to the "new" American landscape which is defined by lateral direction—the west—the bog by its nature is characterized by its age and, as Rafroidi states, is defined by its depth.

⁸ For more information on the history of the Irish landscape, see *Atlas of the Irish Rural Landscape*. F.H.A. Aalen, Kevin Wehlan, & Matthew Stout, eds. (Buffalo: U of Toronto P, 1997).

⁹ Rafroidi, Patrick. "The Sense of Place in Seamus Heaney's Poetry." *Studies on Seamus Heaney*. Jacqueline Genet, ed. Caen: Centre de Pubs. (De l'Univ. de Caen, 1987) 87.

The mystique of the bog, for Heaney at least, rests beneath the surface, in objects that give clues to a past left behind. For centuries, preserved objects, animals, and even people have been unearthed by turfcutters, bringing answers to questions of the past, but often leaving even more questions and providing elements for people to consider and develop mystery. In his essay "Feeling into Words" (1984), Heaney recalls his first memorable encounter with the bog:

I had been vaguely wishing to write a poem about bogland, chiefly because it is a landscape that has a strange assuaging effect on me, one with associations reaching back into early childhood. We used to hear about bog-butter, butter kept fresh for a great number of years under the peat. Then when I was at school the skeleton of an elk had been taken out of a bog nearby and a few of our neighbors had got their photographs in the paper, peering out across its antlers. So I began to get an idea of bog as the memory of the landscape, of a landscape that remembered everything that happened in and to it.¹⁰

The concept of the bog as both landscape and "memory of the landscape" asserts its complexity, beyond its role as simply a location—a peripheral place for the action of the poem. Heaney's notion of the bog as "memory of the landscape" leads one to question his definition of the landscape: besides the earth and trees, what else constitutes a landscape that it merits a memory?

In Heaney's Bog Poems, the landscape is associated with, characterized by, and thus defined by people, animals, and objects. As the word landscape suggests, it is a *scape* of the land, a survey view of a specific tract of land at a specific moment in time.

¹⁰ Heaney, Seamus. "Feeling into Words." *Preoccupations: Selected Prose 1968-1978*. (New York, Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1980) 54.

The bog functions as a preserver of these moments, literally embalming the objects of what I call a *time-place-scape*.

The nature of the bog, as evidenced physically and in poems, allows for these *time-place-scapes* to exist in layers. The development and definition of a layer is a grey area, for the bog constantly changes and grows, as it amasses layers and integrates objects within it. Yet, once below the surface, there are layers of frozen *time-place-scapes* that have been encapsulated in the bog and are sandwiched between past and future layers. Each layer's period has passed and slowly sinks, bringing with it specific elements of the surrounding culture, language, landscape, and entities of that time. On top of it sits the next *time-place-scape*, perhaps borrowing from the last, but inevitably distinguishing itself in various ways.

In the bogs, Heaney discovers a complex source—finite in the history it unearths, infinite in the ensuing mystery it produces. Though the historical artifacts point to proof of *time-place-scape* layers, the time gap (between then and now) leaves room for the reader and poet to create mystery, to fill with what may or may not have transpired. Assuming the role of translator as he changes the land into words for the masses, the poet becomes a bard figure—the traveling poet of Ireland, carrying with him history and fantasy in the weight of words. The poet as bard is the crucial link between fact and figure, spoken and unspoken.

In Heaney's Bog Poems, the bog is the place around which things happen and in which those things are memorialized; as he writes it is both landscape and "memory of the landscape." Thus, the objects that are produced from the bog, and provide inspiration for the poems, serve as historical markers. The time that elapses between the unearthed

time-place-scape objects and the reading of the poem leaves a gap that is filled by elements of mystery—filled both by the poet, as he translates the scene into words, and by the reader, whose mind draws a picture. Besides existing as a landscape in which this takes place, the bog itself takes the form of a body, as Heaney presents in several of his poems. The presence of this body, and those within the bog, calls for the poet to become translator and bard, reading a story, hearing the voices, and retelling it to the masses.

In this thesis, I use ecocriticism as a means to understand the complex relationships that exist in Heaney's bog poems: the relations between nature and culture and between history and mystery. I argue that Heaney's selection of a complex environment, the bog, allows for the development of binaries—nature and culture, history and mystery—into necessarily conflated elements. Chapter One demonstrates how Heaney characterizes the bog and in turn uses the bog as a defining element of Ireland's cultural landscape and identity. Chapter Two illustrates that the bog serves as a portal to history, but at the same time lends to the development of surrounding mystery. The objects and bodies are evidence of both—they are hard evidence of a factual, historical past, but their obscure origins and past lead the reader and poet to fill in spaces with mystery. Chapter Three explores the notion of the bog as embodied, as I argue that through his Bog Poems, Heaney develops the bog in such a way that it becomes a character in the poems and not simply a location. Doing so reasserts the relationship between nature and culture, as a nature-character necessarily becomes part of the culture, both in the *time-place-scapes* and in the poems. Likewise, the representation of the bog in poetry also becomes a body. Chapter Four develops the idea of the poet as bard, for it is through the words of the poet that the translation of one *time-place-scape* to the next is

possible. As the original bard figures gave distinct language to history and mystery, Heaney as the poet gives voice to history as it is preserved in the bog and mystery as it is provoked by objects from the bog. Finally, as the bog literally gives rise to objects that suggest history and provoke mystery, so does the poet give rise to poems, which themselves become objects of history and mystery for the reader. In the conclusion, I discuss the position of Heaney as poet, and how he is implicated in his own poetry, unable simply to serve as a translator.

Though on the surface Heaney's Bog Poems are more about the memory of a past culture than a landscape, and thus seem to thwart an ecocritical analysis, in the following pages I hope to show that the memory of the culture is so associated with the memory of the landscape that an ecocritical analysis is necessary. I begin by using ecocriticism to understand Heaney's Bog Poems and end by using these poems to inform a changing definition of ecocriticism.

Chapter One:

Irish Identity: Rooted in the Bog

One of the ongoing controversies among “true” Irish poets is the language in which the poetry is written. Today, the great majority of Irish poetry is written in English. Heaney’s is no exception. However, the issue of language does not escape mention in Heaney’s works. Growing up in Northern Ireland himself, Heaney was accustomed to the clash between English and Irish traditions. Yet, Heaney, as a man of the written word, struggles especially with the weight of the English language on top of Irish themes. As one critic states, the almost inherent “relation of an ‘Irish Identity’ to the English literary [establishment]... provides not only the language, but the very terms within which the question of identity is posed and resolved.”¹¹ Thus, being Irish necessarily means invoking the English—be it history or language.

In a series of poems, Heaney turns to the bog as a means of contributing to Irish identity. “Bog,” as Richard Brown writes, “is one of the few English borrowings from the Irish language.”¹² Thus, in this commonly known phenomenon of the Irish landscape, Heaney finds a spot which has remained unburdened by the English language that has weighted nearly all other aspects of Irish culture. The bogs are in Ireland, and they are of Ireland. In his essay “Listening to the Landscape,” Tim Robinson writes about language as a product of the landscape, particularly the Irish landscape, arguing that land dictates its name—a rough landscape urges a rough-sounding name, a smooth, rolling landscape

¹¹ Andrews, Elmer. *The Poetry of Seamus Heaney*. (New York: Columbia UP, 1998) 44.

¹² Brown, Richard. “Bog Poems and Book Poems: Doubleness, Self-Translation and Pun in Seamus Heaney and Paul Muldoon.” *The Chosen Ground: Essays on the Contemporary Poetry of Northern Ireland*. Neil Corcoran, ed. (Dufour: Seren Books, 1992) 153.

beckons a smooth, rolling word to describe it. "Placenames," Robinson writes, "make a condensed or elliptic remark about the place, a description, a claim of ownership, a historical anecdote, even a joke or a curse on it."¹³ So does "bog" make a remark about the place it names. In "Kinship," Heaney writes "bog / meaning soft, / the fall of windless rain, / pupil of amber." Just as the definition of the bog fits the word, so does the definition fit the place. Bog, as an Irish word, describes the place, and asserts Irish ownership of such a place. The short "o" in bog, like the heavy vowels that crowd the Irish language and which Heaney closely associates with Irish tradition, *sounds* like the appearance of the bog, or, rather, the name and location seem to suit each other. The sound of the short "o" of bog matches that of its definition—"soft." Just as the word suggests the land, the land seems to suggest the word. Thus, the bog, by means of its location and etymology, exists as the prime location for an assertion of Irish identity. The bog contrasts with "Quagmire, swampland, morass:" all English words for the bog. Yet, Heaney associates these words with "the slime kingdoms, / domains of the cold-blooded, / of mud pads and dirtied eggs." Heaney prides the closer association of the Irish word to the place, writing condescendingly of the English words that may be used to describe bogs, but fail to match or define them as well as the word bog does.

The Bog Poems, however, not only compete with English associations to claim separate identity. As mentioned earlier, the main inspiration for the Bog Poems was a Danish book, *The Bog People*, about Danish bogs and Danish bodies. That Irish poems are the result of foreign inspiration is not lost on Heaney, either, and the poet approaches his poetry with ready connections to and distinctions from the Danish influence.

¹³Robinson, Tim. "Listening to the Landscape." *Setting Forth on the Shores of Connemara and Other Writings*. (Dublin,: Lilliput, 1996) 156.

Heaney's relation with Denmark and its bogs began far back: Mossbawn, the name of the town in which Heaney grew up, is "a derivative of a combination of a Gaelic and an English word which both have a common root in the Danish word Mose, bog."¹⁴ This comes as no surprise, knowing that the Norse (whose word for bog is more similar still: moss¹⁵) began to invade Ireland in the nineteenth century and established towns, including Dublin, which the Danish also conquered for a period. Thus, besides inheriting cultural eccentricities, the Norse and Danes left a distinct mark in naming towns.¹⁶ This influence surfaced early in Heaney's poetry, as he began to explore and poetically establish Ireland's identity. In the poem "Belderg," Heaney writes of the Norse and English influences on the name of his home Mossbawn. He writes:

So I talked of Mossbawn,
A bogland name. 'But *moss*?'
He crossed my old home's music
With older strains of Norse.
I'd told how its foundation

Was mutable as sound
And how I could derive
A forked root from that ground
And make *bawn* an English fort,
A planter's walled-in mound,

¹⁴ Böss, Michael. "Roots in the Bog: Notions of Identity in the Poetry and Essays of Seamus Heaney." *Ireland: Towards New Identities?* Michael Boss & Karl-Heinz Westarp, eds. (Oxford: Aarhus UP, 1998) 138.

¹⁵ Brown, Richard 153.

¹⁶ For more information on the history of Ireland, including the invasion of the Norse, see J.C. Beckett's *A Short History of Ireland*. (London: The Cresset Library, 1979).

Or else find sanctuary

And think of it as Irish

As the poem notes, Mossbawn names an Irish place and natural phenomenon: a bog in Ireland. Yet, as the second speaker in the poem points out to the first, the “foundation [of the word] / was mutable as sound.” One could be directed to the Norse or English origins of the word, or simply “find sanctuary / And think of it as Irish.” Heaney, like the speaker of the poem, finds himself in a place of conflict, desiring to find an Irish identity of his home place, and instead finding a web of additional cultures that claim the location by virtue of a name.

In another translation, bog in modern Danish, “is the word for book.”¹⁷ As Irish culture defines the bog, so does the bog inform Heaney’s books of poetry. Richard Brown asserts that the literal associations between the word as describing land and meaning “book” reinforce Heaney’s comparison between the digging motion of the turfcutter and the reader “who may find ‘anatomical plates / Buried along these dusty quays / Among books yellowed like mummies.’”¹⁸ Just as the bog is a book full of “plates” that tell history, so do the bogs become poems in books that may themselves become “yellowed like mummies.” While the bog is a place from which the poet can gather subjects for poetry, it becomes a subject itself, as the poet represents and recreates it in his works. The bodies found in the bogs parallel the recreated bodies in the poems, just as the physically defined bogs parallel the environment of the bog created in the poems—physically defined by words and structure.

¹⁷ Brown, Richard 153.

¹⁸ *Ibid.* 154.

Besides the obvious associations between the Danish bog (meaning book) and Heaney's Bog Poems, the definition also asserts the relationship between Denmark and Ireland. Heaney alludes to the Norse presence in Ireland in his *North* poems "Belderg," "Viking Dublin," "Digging Skeleton," and "Bone Dreams." In "Belderg," the poem poses the question: "But the Norse ring on your tree?" which refers to the strain of Norse that exists in Irish culture. The line also refers to the Norse "World Tree," or Yggdrasil, which for the Norse represented the universe and was the connection between the gods, the dead, and all men. Such a reference suggests that the cultures share something in common, as they are shaded by the same overarching World Tree, or universe. But asking about "the Norse ring on *your* tree" (emphasis added), the second speaker emphasizes the focus of the Norse within the Irish, just as the word *moss* is within an Irish placename, Mossbawn.

In the poetry, Heaney easily establishes that there is Norse influence in Ireland, but Ireland in the Norse? Is Ireland present enough in the Norse culture that Heaney can justify a parallel? The connection Heaney establishes to the bog people found in Denmark arises in a prose piece, citing sacrifice to a female deity; he states: "Taken in relation to the tradition of Irish political martyrdom for that cause whose icon is Kathleen Ni Houlihan, this is more than an archaic barbarous rite: it is an archetypal pattern."¹⁹ *The Bog People* was published in 1969, right as the "Troubles" of Ulster intensified. Heaney saw the relation between the Danish sacrifice to a female goddess of the land and the Irish sacrifice to a traditionally female land: Kathleen Ni Houlihan. Far from arguing that the bogs in *The Bog People* were identical to those in Ireland, Heaney relates to them because of the pattern they establish, and of which modern Ireland is part.

¹⁹ Heaney, Seamus. "Feeling into Words." 54.

However, as Heaney asserts in the first of his Bog Poems, "Bogland," the Irish bog is not simply one repetition of a pattern. The Irish bog is unique and is the defining landscape of the Irish culture, the answer to one country's landmark mountains, another's defining deserts, or another's famous fields. Specifically, the bogs are Heaney's response to the American west. Written for T.P. Flanagan, one of Ireland's most distinguished painters, the work describes the landscapes the Flanagan depicts in his works, giving similar homage to the defining landscape by painting the same images with words. The characterization of the bog through the poem marks it as distinctly Irish: "They've take the skeleton / Of the Great Irish Elk / Out of the peat." Likewise, Heaney writes of the bog butter found in Irish bogs, "Butter sunk under / More than a hundred years / Was recovered salty and white." As opposed to the pioneers of the American West, who travel diligently in that direction to find pristine land, "Our [Irish] pioneers keep striking / Inwards and downwards, // Every layer they strip / Seems camped on before." Where the West offers promise of new opportunity, the bog delivers proof of past lives, of opportunities taken. From these examples, Heaney establishes that the bog about which he writes is distinctive to the Irish culture and landscape, and patterns that may include the bogs do not define the bogs.

The last line of this first poem, "The wet centre is bottomless," challenges the idea of the West, which is limited by its coast. Instead, the poem acknowledges no limit to the end of the bog for the "pioneers keep striking / Inwards and downwards," not out or away. The idea of the endless centre is repeated in the final Bog Poem, "Kinship," in which Heaney writes "This centre holds / and spreads," it has not reached an end or limit. Here, the reader recalls the famous line by the Irish poet William B. Yeats, who writes that

“Things fall apart; the centre cannot hold,” in his poem “The Second Coming.” Where Yeats’s “centre cannot hold,” the “wet centre” of Heaney’s bogs “holds / and spreads.” Yeats’s centre lies in the middle of contraries which tend in different directions. Heaney’s bog, also full of contraries, described in the same poem as “Earth-pantry, bone-vault, / sun-bank, embalmer,” holds all of the contrasting elements together, and shows no sign of breaking. It is “a bag of waters,” indicating life, and “a melting grave,” simultaneously indicating death. Like Yeats’s “The Second Coming,” full of gyre imagery, “Kinship” expresses seasonal cycles in which “The mothers of autumn / sour and sink” into each other. As centre, the bog attracts all parts of nature, in direct opposition to Yeats’s centre, from which objects seem to repel in an apocalyptic moment.

As expressed through the Bog Poems, the bog serves as the appropriate place to establish Irish identity. As the word “bog” is Irish, unusual in a culture that adopts English as its language, it supports Heaney’s assertion that the bog is indeed an Irish place. Additionally, the bog serves as a portal to history that marks the Irish culture, it functions as a body of Irish culture, and it exists as a place from which the poet can extract and record Irish influence, each of which will be explored in the following chapters. Just as Heaney expresses in “Bogland,” the bog is the identifying landscape of the Irish culture. That Heaney would write several poems revolved around the bog illustrates that it functions as more than simply a place for the poetry. As suggested, crucial connections between nature and nature exist and understanding how those connections are established through the poetry gives the reader a chance to understand the Irish connection to the land, and in what ways the land defines and is defined by the culture.

Chapter Two:

“Bearers of History and Mystery”: Objects of the Bog

Unearthed objects, animals, and bodies of the bog are portals to the past. In “Place, Pastness, Poems: A Triptych” (1985), Heaney concentrates on the power of an object to radiate meaning, writing that the object “transmits the climate of a lost world and keeps alive a domestic intimacy with a reality which might otherwise have vanished.”²⁰ Objects, then, are tangible reminders of the past. As they come in contact with humanity, the objects “are recognized as emblems of a symbolic past which also claims to be a historical past.”²¹ The objects are drawn into a new landscape and given names; they are then transcribed onto paper by the poet and become words. And for Heaney—for any poet—words are sources of power; the poet wields power in his choice of words, their combination, and the poem’s delivery, and the words themselves are powerful, for, as Heaney defines them, they are “bearers of history and mystery.”²²

While the words bear both history *and* mystery, a crucial difference exists between the two. Whereas history is fact—known and provable—mystery is the exact opposite—unknown, not provable, merely speculation. The objects bear both. Just by existing, an object is proof to a history. A scratch on the surface, such as “the small outline” on the bone in “Viking Dublin: Trial Pieces,” is evidence that someone, somewhere at some time encountered that bone. Some details are more easily filled in than others; today anthropologists, such as those who worked with Glob in Denmark, are

²⁰ Heaney, Seamus. “Place, Pastness, Poems: A Triptych.” *Salmagundi*, 68-69 (Fall 1985-Winter 1986) 31.

²¹ *Ibid.* 35.

²² Heaney, Seamus. “Feeling into Words.” *Preoccupations: Selected Prose 1968-1978*. (New York, Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1980) 45.

able to determine how exactly that scratch was made, with what instrument, in what year. Other details, however, remain unknown, and this is how mystery becomes implicated.

In the Bog Poems, fact is aligned with the objects that emerge from the bog—the objects and bodies. The objects themselves point to history, but the existence of these objects in the *time-place-scape* of today leads to the creation of mystery. The absence of objects of a known past to fill the time gap leads the audience, reader, and viewer to create a mystery. The role of the poet as creator leads to the role of the poet as mystery-maker, for the essence the poet conveys in his poem is one he partially creates without proof—the mystery is that which comes only from the poet's speculation and inner desires. While the writing responds to a proof-laden object, the poem also reflects and is representative of the poet's ideals. In the Bog Poems, creation—and imposition of that creation on the subject (be it bone, body, or land)—replaces the *created*, or the physical, finished object, unearthed from the bog. The two serve hand-in-hand through the mind and pen of the poet, the created suggesting and inspiring the poet's creation, and that creation reflecting the created. In "Place, Pastness, Poems: A Triptych," Heaney writes that our tendency to impose one past upon another "gives us our cultural markings, contributes to our status as creatures conditioned by language and history."²³ He continues by describing fairy tales derived not from books, but from "objects in the everyday surrounding," suggesting that creation of mystery is a natural part of culture and history, thereby reaffirming the role and necessity of poet as creator.²⁴

In "Viking Dublin: Trial Pieces," Heaney gracefully slides between history and mystery as he describes the trial piece found on the ground. Trial pieces were pieces of

²³ Heaney, Seamus. "Place, Pastness, Poems: A Triptych." 34.

²⁴ *Ibid.* 35.

bone Viking artists used to practice carving ornaments that would later be transferred to metal. For Heaney, the trial piece is a document of history. He admits to not knowing its origin, but states the bare facts about it: "It could be a jaw-bone / Or a rib or a portion cut / From something sturdier." Here, Heaney begins with admission that the trial piece could be any number of things, but he does not know, nor does he pretend to know. Rather, he continues to the importance of the piece, dismissing his previous suggestions and stating the obvious: "Anyhow, a small outline // Was incised." "Anyhow," he claims, the other facts do not matter; "a small outline" matters, something seen, felt, known, and, furthermore, something for the poet to fill in—to complete. Heaney discusses the nature of the art, allowing for history to mingle with mystery: "These are trial pieces, / The craft's mystery / Improvised on bone." Here a distinction emerges: that they are trial pieces is known, but that which surrounds the craft—who did it, and why—is a mystery. The pieces are "magnified on display" so all can see, but this only perpetuates the "craft's mystery."

"Viking Dublin," the first of the Bog Poems in *North*, begins here by establishing the link between history and the written. Just as Heaney inscribes history in poetry, so did the Vikings inscribe their history—an isolated moment of culture—in a form of art to be viewed and "read." Additionally, as Heaney extrapolates history from the trial pieces, so will the reader of Heaney's reflections use his words to create an impression of Viking Dublin.

The line that etches the trial pieces, "like a child's tongue / following the toils // of his calligraphy," becomes a "migrant line. // That enters my longhand." It is as if Heaney is unable to resist the translation of the line directly into his own. As Heaney scholar

Elmer Andrews writes, Heaney's poems are "about transit, that is, about transitions from one place to another."²⁵ The concept of transit, of movement, appears in the poem's water imagery. The incising is compared to "a longship, a buoyant / migrant line," suggesting that the line—a record of history—moves from place to place, while remaining intact and unchanged except for its surrounding environment. Immediately following these lines, Heaney describes the movement or transition of the history into his own handwriting, giving him the authority to transcribe and record the history, and giving him the position—as a selected participant in the history—to suggest things about the history that are not explicit, but instead ideas of his informed mind. Like the "buoyant / migrant line" that changes surroundings, the line is now of Heaney's world and influence, but it remains a trial piece in its original form. Through his act of writing, Heaney assumes a position in which he is able to translate the record of one *time-place-scape* directly into the poetry of his own *time-place-scape* today. However, this role is only superficially written into Heaney's poetry; rather, Heaney creates mystery in order to establish a continuity between the history of yesterday and the presence of today.

The same history-mystery conflict arises in the bog-body poems.²⁶ In his several poems about bog-bodies, Heaney outlines the physical details, but in such a way that he causes the reader to extend the history with mystery. Or, as is often the case, Heaney himself extends the history with his own rendering of mystery. In "The Tollund Man," Heaney's first bog-body poem, Heaney does just this. Having seen pictures of the Tollund Man in Glob's *The Bog People*, Heaney vividly describes "his peat-brown head, / The mild pods of his eye-lids, / His pointed skin cap." Alliteration among the three

²⁵ Andrews, Elmer. *The Poetry of Seamus Heaney*. (New York: Columbia UP, 1998) 57.

²⁶ The bog-body poems include "The Tollund Man," (from *Wintering Out*) and "Come to the Bower," "Bog Queen," "The Grauballe Man," "Punishment," and "Strange Fruit" (from *North*).

lines—"peat," "pods," and "pointed"—draws the reader's attention to the stark image of the body. The use of "peat" and "pods" reminds the reader of the body's place—in the bog and becoming part of the bog. What makes the conflict between history and mystery so prevalent is the development of the poetry: the inspiration is visual, the inspired creation is written, and the poem becomes once again a visual image, the words having passed through the mind of the reader. Heaney does his best to describe the body. Filtered through his mind, however, his translation of the visual into words is marred, or at the least marked, by his own interpretation. When Heaney contemplates this man's history, he designs a particular version, imagining "his sad freedom / As he rode to the tumbrel" to his death, imposing a story on the body he sees.

"The Tollund Man" is perhaps more straightforward than other bog-body poems, for Heaney situates himself as the speaker within the poem. Vowing to "stand a long time" looking at the body, the speaker immediately imagines a vengeful bog as "she tightened her torc on him / And opened her fen, / Those dark juices working / Him to a saint's kept body." Though the bog does indeed preserve the body, the poem characterizes the bog as a powerful goddess, ruthless as she bares down on the body. While the lines "Bridgroom to the goddess" refer to the male sacrifices to the Norse goddess Nerthus—the namesake of the next poem in the collection—the poem hints at a nurturing bog, one that "kept" and saved the body, not just destroyed it. Just as there is dual possibility for the characterization of the bog, there is conflict within the speaker, who wants to go to Aarhus, but believes that he "will feel lost, / Unhappy and at home," a feeling due perhaps in part to the mystery he creates (believing "the sad freedom / as he rode the tumbrel") while simply seeing the body.

The same history and mystery conflict arises in “The Digging Skeleton,” when Heaney asks questions that point to the mystery he wants to build: “my patient ones, // Tell me, as you labour hard / To break this unrelenting soil, / What barns are there for you to fill? / What farmer dragged you from the boneyard?” Speaking to the bodies, creating their pasts, the poem paints a bias against the modern farmers who drag peaceful bodies from the grave. Like words for the reader, pictures cause Heaney create a history for what he sees, an action which necessarily translates to the creation of mystery, for one cannot actually create or invent past history. He imagines a response, instilling characteristics of faith, diligence, and patience on the bodies: “this is the reward of faith / in rest eternal” and “by the sweat of our brows / We earn our deaths.” The image “Digging Skeleton” creates is of hard working men, “spines hoped towards the sunk edge, / of the spade,” almost paused mid-labor, as if literally frozen in a *time-place-scape*.

Through words of the poem, the reader accepts Heaney’s creation and further builds his own image of the bodies, though he cannot see the pictures Heaney draws upon. The power of words leads the reader to develop to an image of the body and character regardless of having seen or known the actual body. Using Heaney’s translation of the site, the reader creates images of bodies along with their clearly unknown souls. The reader leaves the poem with the “words as bearers of history and mystery,” and, for lack of evidence, further develops the mystery that surrounds the skeletons about which Heaney writes. Linking Baudelaire (the location of the bog in “Digging Skeleton”) to Ireland, the poem suggests a potential connection—the bodies of Baudelaire, as represented in the poetry, resemble images of the Irish working during the Potato Famine. Linking two histories here, the objects represent a history and the poet fills in the words

to establish a connection. Like the “illustrator” of part I of “Digging Skeleton” who “responded gravely to the sad / mementoes of anatomy,” so does the poet draw a picture with words, responding to sad mementoes that remind him of another history.

The word “digging” in the title points at a theme common in Heaney’s work. In perhaps his most famous poem by the same name, Heaney writes “Between my finger and my thumb / The squat pen rests. / I’ll dig with it.”²⁷ Using this analogy, Heaney digs to unearth fodder for poetry. He unearths history, working with the assumption that truth increases with depth. However, as Richard Brown notes, the act of digging “provides a mysterious analogy not only with reading and writing, but with the act of unblanketing.”²⁸ Through digging the layers of bog to reach the bodies and objects, there is a sort of uncovering that happens, a revelation. This revealing of the bodies leads to the revelation of creation in Heaney’s poetry.

“The Grauballe Man” demonstrates this type of revelation. As Heaney describes the Grauballe Man, he moves down the body, describing each exposed part. As the descriptions begin, each of the parts is compared to, or has become, a natural object—the body is a “black river,” his wrists “bog oak,” his heel “a basalt egg,” his instep “a swan’s foot / or a wet swamp root,” his hips “the ridge / and purse of a mussel,” his spine “an eel.” These comparisons reveal that the body, originally a foreign object in the bog, transitions into a more natural object, becoming part of the bog. One exposure, the chin “raised above the vent / of his slashed throat // that has tanned and toughened,” suggests more about the bog; it suggests the type of sacrificial violence that lends to speculation on the part of the poet and reader. Though the rest of the body turns to other natural

²⁷ “Digging” *Death of a Naturalist. Selected Poems, 1965-1975*. (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1980) 4.

²⁸ Brown, Richard 155.

forms, the neck and chin remain as such, reminding the reader of the human aspect of the body—how it got there, why the body as part of the bog is more complicated than the other objects it becomes (swamp root, egg, etc.).

Heaney declares his own tendency to conflate fact and fiction by questioning “Who will say ‘corpse’ / to his vivid cast? / Who will say ‘body’ / To his opaque repose?” As if situated between life and death, the body appears to embrace both. The poem admits the challenge in simply accepting the limited biological facts that accompany the bodies. The bodies, like words, carry much more weight and open up questions beyond the physical; though dead, the bodies seem alive. The body here is not simply an object; it is in “opaque repose,” it is a man with thoughts and feelings taking a rest instead of lying dead with his thoughts and feelings complete. But, as Heaney reminds the readers, though the body becomes a part of nature, it is dead, like a “foetus”—a body which emerges dead. The heavy “actual weight / of each hooded victim” reminds the reader of the object’s—the body’s—reality.

Heaney’s questioning illustrates another element of history, which scholar Thomas Docherty poses: “is history dead, a thing of the past; or is it alive, vivid, a presence of the past?”²⁹ Through Heaney’s Bog Poems, there is a suggestion of historical duality: the reader gets a sense of complete, finished history through evidence (each unearthed body and object sits in Heaney’s *time-place-scape* as representative of another) and of ongoing, continual history, which welcomes and integrates the emergent objects into this particular wave of a historical cycle. For example, in “Viking Dublin,” the trial

²⁹ Docherty, Thomas. “Ana-; or Postmodernism, Landscape, Seamus Heaney.” *Contemporary Poetry Meets Modern Theory*. Eds. Easthope, Antony & John O. Thompson. Theory/Culture Series. 10. (Toronto: U of Toronto P, 1991) 70.

piece is of one *time-place-scape*, but is adopted into another when it is put into a museum and becomes the subject of a poem. Likewise, this cycle is illustrated in “Come to the Bower” when the speaker is drawn to the bog-body of the “dark-bowered queen” who “is waiting” for the speaker’s action. It is as if, when in a second *time-place-scape*, the objects assume a new life and therefore assume new histories—contributing to their own and that of the *time-place-scape* around them. As Docherty notes, “Heaney’s task in the text is not to discover an archeological remnant of the past in its antiquarianism, but rather to write in the interstices of history itself, to be historical and to be aware of the flow and movement of history, history as ‘becoming’ even as he writes.”³⁰ The “flow and movement of history” is represented by the “buoyant / migrant line” of “Viking Dublin” that indeed moves with the changing times. In “Kinship,” Heaney also asserts a transitional history, as the weather is “composting / the floor it rots into.” The sense of history as “moving” and “becoming” asserts that there is no “finished” history, and perhaps the mystery that Heaney creates around the bodies becomes a part of this cyclical history, serving as an element of a larger *myth*.

Myth, as distinguished from mystery, is more of a *universal* mystery—a collection of mysteries and “creations” that have become part of history and tradition and have begun to reverse the development of history into mystery. Whereas, for Heaney, history and evidence inspires the creation of mystery, the establishment of this mystery—inscribing it on paper and setting it in stone—contributes to myth. Repeated stories develop into folklore and become so widespread as to become myth. This specific contribution to myth additionally reasserts the connection of the Irish to the Danish; it substantiates Heaney’s attempt to put Irish meaning to what is a foreign inspiration.

³⁰ *Ibid.* 72.

However, several critics dislike the connection to myth that emerges in the Bog Poems, claiming that “Heaney’s ‘North’ Bog Poems *create* myth”³¹ (emphasis added) and that Heaney is “subordinating ethics to aesthetics: by giving himself over to ‘the establishment of myths’ and the aesthetic ideal of the ‘well-made poem,’ Heaney... is unable to critique traditional concepts of national identity or interrogate the nature and function of acts of violence.”³² Yet, by grasping onto these universal trends and repeated patterns, Heaney *does* critique traditional concepts of national identity, using the Bog Poems to discuss recent and modern injustices.

The ability to critique violence is especially evident in the poem “Punishment,” when the speaker imagines himself as involved with the past of his subject. Writing of a female who was hanged, Heaney implicates his own emotion with the moment of her death. The entire poem is a creation of what could have been; there is no evidence as to whether or not this character is even based on an actual body. Heaney calls the body “Little adultress,” imagining her crime and the scene as her “betraying sisters... wept by the railings.” Heaney expresses a sympathy towards his subject, stating “I almost love you / But would have cast, I know, / The stones of silence.” His sympathy for the girl transforms to empathy for others as he draws himself back in time to the very setting of this situation. Yet, what complicates the poem, and perhaps encourages the critics’ claim, is that the speaker admits inaction, expressing no outright disdain for the system, almost glorifying the “tar-black face” of his “poor scapegoat.”

³¹ O’Neill. “Violence and the Sacred in Seamus Heaney’s North” *Seamus Heaney: The Shaping Spirit*. Phyllis Carey & Catharine Malloy, eds. (Newark: U of Delaware P, 1996) 93-4.

³² Andrews, Elmer, p. 42. Also see David Lloyd’s “‘Pap for the dispossessed’: Seamus Heaney and the Poetics of Identity.” *Seamus Heaney: A Collection of Critical Essays*. Elmer Andrews, ed. (London: MacMillan, 1992).

Two things mark this poem, aside from its first-person stance (unusual among the Bog Poems): the speaker's alignment with the punishers (as opposed to simply expressing a feeling of remorse for the victim, as he does for the Grauballe Man or for the Bog Queen) and a simultaneous sense of guilt for her death. While the alignment with the punishers may lead one to think that Heaney ignores the actual brutality of the violence, the simultaneous sense of guilt he expresses, which emerges in what some describe as a sort of necrophiliac desire for her, illustrates that he does not simply subordinate "ethics to aesthetics." The relation of this poem and its ancient subject to modern day Ireland is explicit: the "betraying sisters, / cauled in tar" are synonymous with the Irish girls who were tarred and feathered for courting the British in Northern Ireland in 1971. Because of this link, Heaney does not abstain from critiquing concepts of national identity. Instead, the connection to modern day Ireland makes the crime all the more potent, and the guilt more relevant. The speaker stands in silence and his inaction remains shocking to the reader who draws a shameful link between the speaker who stands by silently at this ridiculous punishment and his modern neighbor, or even the self, who stands by silently at modern punishments such as the tar and feathering of young Irish girls.

While the fact that the poem is based on a Danish body makes the violent act more universal and fitting for established myths of sacrifice, the last two stanzas which address the connection to Ireland inform the reader that Heaney does not dismiss the violent actions. The speaker is passive, for he would "almost love you," and he "stood dumb," yet he expresses empathy in that he "can feel the tug / of the halter at the nape / of her neck" while he "can see her drowned / body in the bog." While Lloyd argues that

Heaney disregards historical reality, and reduces history to myth,³³ the close association between the ancient brutality and modern injustice proves that he does not simply reduce history to myth, but instead draws a parallel between two *time-place-scapes*, making the history all the more real to the speaker, Heaney, and the reader.

Heaney writes that objects serve as “a point of entry into a common emotional ground of memory and belonging. It [the object] transmits the climate of a lost world and keeps alive a domestic intimacy with a reality which might otherwise have vanished.”³⁴ As he claims, there is a “common emotional ground” which is made apparent by objects, including poetry, which becomes an object for the reader. An object from the past imposes a sense of continuity between the past and present and links a “finished” history with continual history. The “reality which might otherwise have vanished” becomes reality to the poet and reader because history repeats itself; the poet relates one incident of an overarching pattern with another. Additionally, Heaney writes that objects “possess a kind of moral force...and suggest obligations to the generations who have been silenced, drawing us into some covenant with them.”³⁵ Heaney’s assertion that objects’ worth transcends their physical meanness counters the claims of his critics, who assume that the aesthetics of his poetry means a sacrifice of ethics. This is incorrect. It is through ethics—and relating past action to present action—that Heaney develops aesthetics, but he hardly sacrifices one for the other—both are necessary for the poem’s success. In “Punishment,” where Heaney’s critics suggest that he ignores the actuality of sacrifice to create poetry, the object—the girl—serves as a moral force, putting the speaker in a

³³ See David Lloyd’s “‘Pap for the dispossessed:’ Seamus Heaney and the Poetics of Identity.” *Seamus Heaney: A Collection of Critical Essays*. Elmer Andrews, ed. (London: MacMillan, 1992).

³⁴ Heaney, Seamus. “Plase, Pastness, Poems: A Triptych.” 31.

³⁵ *Ibid.* 31.

moral dilemma: he “would connive / in civilized outrage / yet understand the exact / and tribal, intimate revenge.” While the speaker sits on the side of the punishers, his simultaneous relation to the equivalent situation in Northern Ireland leads him to draw that “covenant” with the girl, even while understanding the feeling and emotion of her judges.

In Heaney’s Bog Poems, history and mystery are the result of the objects from the bogs and of the poems. In the inspiration—the object from the bog—Heaney and the reader find evidence of history. In his creation of poetry as a reflection on the object, Heaney integrates the object into history again, transferring the object of one *time-place-scape* into another, and creating a pattern. The time lapse between the placement and unearthing of the object leaves a gap between two *time-place-scapes* which both Heaney as individual and poet and the reader fill in by imaginative creation. This development of history into mystery contributes to established myth and reinforces the Irish association with a Norse inspiration. Heaney shows that the presence of both history and mystery is necessary for his identification of the Irish with Glob’s Bog People and that the presence of one oftentimes necessitates the presence of the other. In the Bog Poems, the words of the poems become objects—“bearers of history and mystery,” illuminating history, but in a light which contributes to the creation of mystery.

Chapter Three:
The Bog Embodied

The bog is a place, but its importance in Heaney's poetry illustrates that its definition extends beyond that. By their very nature, the Bog Poems turn the bog into an object and subject of the poem; they objectify the bog as opposed to leaving it as simply a pervasive location for the poetry. Objectified, the bog becomes a thing, an entity, a body itself. Heaney's poetry associates the bog with bodies in three dimensions: one, the bog as a body; two, the bog as a creation (composition) of bodies; three, the bog and "creative" bodies as deities.

In "Mossbawn" (1984), Heaney writes of the omphalos of his community's landscape—the water-pump. The water-pump declares its presence and position, spewing forth water from its life-giving source to the rhythm of the words "omphalos, omphalos, omphalos."³⁶ The omphalos serves as a constant universal center and source of all that has been and will be. In *Passage to the Center* (1999), Daniel Tobin argues that this concept of "center" saturates Heaney's work and can be traced throughout his poetry. Specifically in the Bog Poems, the bog emerges as a life-giving center. As a source of water (bogs began as lakes), it is inherently a life-font, forever the "wet centre" Heaney calls it in "Bogland." The bog literally delivers life from within it. In "Feeling into Words," Heaney's first recollection of the bog involves evidence of life—a giant elk—being pulled from the peat. Heaney writes of a specific body in "The Tollund Man," which is evidence of life spewed forth from the bog. "The Tollund Man"

³⁶ Heaney, Seamus. "Mossbawn." *Preoccupations: Selected Prose 1968-1978*. (New York, Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1980) 34.

expresses Heaney's wish to see the bodies—the life—that come from the bogs by suggesting that this “holy ground” is made to “germinate / The scattered, ambushed / Flesh of labourers, / Stockinged corpses / Laid out in the farmyards.” Clearly, the poem represents the bog as a source of life. The use of the verb “germinate” in “The Tollund Man” presses the characterization of the bog as life-giving fertile ground. Later in “Kinship,” Heaney declares the bog “Ruminant ground, / digestion of mollusc / and seed-pod, / deep pollen bin.” The “ruminant” ground fills with life-giving elements; both seed-pods and pollen are necessary in germination of flowers and plants. The bog then is all-powerful in its ability to self-produce life.

Heaney pairs terms of biological germination with the literal germination, or bringing forth, of bodies. As mentioned before, what drew Heaney to the bogs were the objects, animals, and especially people that were found within them. While this “germination” of bodies does not literally produce living entities, it does produce evidence of once-living entities, and the act of delivering those bodies substantiates the characterization of the bog as a life-giving body, and furthermore, female.

The association of the land with the female body is part of a much bigger pattern, in which, as described by Andrea Blair, “during the paralinguistic state, the infant experiences a feeling of oneness with space—the infant's body and mother's body and everything the infant perceives are all interfused as a singular experience.”³⁷ This pattern of a female land associated with birth is evidenced in both “Bog Queen” and “The Grauballe Man” when the bodies are identified as being attached to “a slimy birth-cord /

³⁷ Blair, Andrea. “Landscape in Drag: The Paradox of Feminine Space in Susan Warner's *The Wide, Wide World*.” *The Greening of Literary Scholarship: Literature, Theory, and the Environment*. Steven Rosendale, ed. (Iowa City: U of Iowa P, 2002) 113.

of bog” and appear “like a forceps baby.” The identification of the bodies as child-like reinforces the notion of the bog as a mother, a female.

While the bodies produced by the bog are lifeless, Heaney repeatedly compares them to children in a mother’s womb. Significantly, he uses bodily images between life stages, just as the bog bodies sit between layers. In “Bog Queen,” the body is ripped from the nurturing bog-womb. Upon rising from the bog, the Bog Queen sees her “slimy birth-cord / of bog, had been cut.” Immediately following this “cut,” she surfaces into a new airy landscape as “hacked bone, skull-ware, / frayed stitches, tufts.” From her safe haven where she is “alive” in the bog, she is pulled into a foreign landscape in which she cannot survive. “The Bog Queen” illustrates Heaney’s argument for the bog-people: within the bog, though literally dead, they are part of a *time-place-scape* that remains and exists in a layer in the bog; there the bodies live. Conversely, to be pulled from that is immediate death—they are no longer part of their *time-place-scape* and are made to be stale, foreign objects in an environment in which they cannot thrive.

In “The Grauballe Man,” the body Heaney describes has hair “as a foetus’s” and the head and shoulder are “bruised like a forceps baby.” The body emerges from the bog as a child emerges from the womb, though Heaney’s bog child is far from a Mother’s flawless ideal. Use of “foetus” implies an unborn child, one that appropriately does not survive outside of the womb. Likewise, that the body is “bruised like a forceps baby” suggests that the body was unwilling to leave the bog and had to be forced; it is not ready, or, as a foetus, unable. It also suggests that something is not right—the body does not come out willingly or healthily; it is damaged by the men who pulled it out, but flawed and marked for all to see and know. This implies a patriarchal destruction of a female

land. For Heaney, this relationship of man with the land begins with one of his earliest and most famous poems, "Digging," in which the use of the spade is the "paternal prototypic activity."³⁸ In the Bog Poems, the turfcutters who dig are presumably male, and their destruction of the land is particularly violent. The male-turfcutter/female-land relationship pits the aggressive modern male against the timeless female. This relationship translates into that between Ireland and Britain, for example in the poem "The Ocean's Love to Ireland," in which a male Britain rapes the female Ireland. In the poem, English "Raleigh has backed the maid to a tree / As Ireland is backed to England // And drives inland / Till all her strands are breathless." Like Raleigh, who violently drives and tears into the Irish maid without repair, so do the turfcutters and diggers drive and tear into the Irish land, unforgiving, only taking, not giving.

In regard to the bog, the female bog is repeatedly characterized as the victim of destruction, while the male turfcutter is constantly the victimizer. Yet, the womb is not always a source of good and life. As the poems also illustrate, the roles switch, in which the bog becomes the victimizer and the male sacrifice is the victim. In "The Tollund Man," the victim is "Bridegroom to the goddess," and while the bog preserves him "to a saint's kept body," she draws the life out of him. The same thing happens in "The Grauballe Man," in which the "hooded victim" is delivered to the bog alive and then taken from the bog dead. In one sense, the female bog gets revenge on her male destructors, but only in the sense that the victims are male. Those males that do become victims do so as part of sacrificial tradition—rather than the bog acting *upon* them, as the turfcutters do to the land, she accepts the sacrifice. Additionally, as evidenced in "Come to the Bower," "Bog Queen," "Punishment," and "Strange Fruit," the victims are not

³⁸ Brown, Richard 155.

always male and thus the action of the bog cannot be seen as a sort of answer to male destruction of the land.

The female figure of the bog is not a new concept with Heaney. In *The Bog People*, Glob writes of the bog people's reverence for Nerthus, Norse goddess of earth and fertility. With a goddess associated with fertility, it is no surprise that reverence for her translates directly to reverence for the earth and that which brings life—the bog. Heaney paraphrases Glob's description of Nerthus as “the Mother Goddess, the goddess of the ground who needed new bridegrooms each winter to bed with her in her sacred place, the bog, to ensure the renewal and fertility of the territory in the spring.”³⁹ Religion, a distinct manifestation of culture, is directly linked to the land, and thus a reverence for elements of that religion also becomes a reverence for the land.

Heaney introduced the female figure that epitomizes the bog well before the majority of the Bog Poems had been written. In “The Tollund Man,” Heaney describes the poem's namesake as “Bridegroom to the goddess.” The goddess is Nerthus, the namesake of the immediate next poem. The action of the bog in “The Tollund Man” reaffirms the gendering of the bog: “She tightened her torc on him / And opened her fen, / Those dark juices working / Him to a saint's body kept.” The bog as an opening asserts the female image of the bog as womb and reemerges in “Kinship” when the poet sees “the soft lips of the growth / muttered and split, / a tawny rut // opening at my feet / like a shed skin.” Like the vaginal lips that open to the womb, the lips of the bog remind the reader of the womb within. Each of the two descriptions describe an opening, suggesting another sacred, hidden place. A difference between the two images, however, which emerges in other poems, is that the opening action in “The Tollund Man” is performed by

³⁹ Heaney, Seamus. “Feeling into Words.” 57.

the bog itself. In "Kinship," the opening is more aggressive, and is provoked by the presumably male speaker and a masculine object: "I found a turf-spade / hidden under bracken, / laid flat, and overgrown / with a green fog. // As I raised it / the soft lips of the growth / muttered and split." Where the female bog encapsulates and preserves what it holds, the male figure divides and takes from the land.

Like "Kinship," "Come to the Bower" expresses a highly feminized depiction of the bog with sexually explicit language. The poet softly carries his hands "to where the dark-bowered queen, / Who I unpin, / Is waiting." Later, he reaches "to the bullion / Of her Venus bone." As Tobin suggests, the "dark-bowered queen" of the poem is Nerthus herself, and though she takes the form of a sacrificed body, the body becomes "one with the fertility goddess" through the sacrificial rite.⁴⁰ As the speaker unpins and unwraps the sheathed queen, "spring water / Starts to rise around her"; combined with the explicit mention of "her Venus bone," this clearly suggests the fertility of Nerthus and the bog that is associated with her.

The juxtaposition of the female sacrifice, potentially Nerthus herself, in the bog (another manifestation of Nerthus) fully illuminates my first notion of the bog—as a body—as well as the second—the bog as a composition of bodies. A second juxtaposition exists, for the nature of sacrifice as life-taking sharply contrasts with the former notion of the bog as a life-giving center. While this may appear as a conflict, it actually strengthens the power of the bog. Like allowing the bog to contain both the seed pod and pollen in "Kinship," Heaney's depiction of the bog as both life-giving and life-taking makes it all-powerful. Heaney continues this theme in "Kinship," describing the bog as "Earth-pantry, bone-vault, / sun-bank, embalmer / of votive goods / and sabred

⁴⁰ Tobin 125.

fugitives.” These few lines point to the duality of the bog. Each subject defies its match, yet the collection of all of the subjects into a single entity—the bog—makes perfect sense. The matching of the contrary terms achieves the complexity of the bog that otherwise eludes description.

As the poems suggest, sacrificial rites to the bog were common, and through natural biological processes, the bodies literally become part of the bog. Heaney dwells on this idea in “Kinship” as he describes the composition pattern of the land:

“The mothers of autumn / sour and sink, / ferments of husk and leaf // deepen their ochres.” The composition pattern simultaneously indicates an up and down pattern: “the vowel of earth / dreaming its root / in flowers and snow, // mutation of weathers / and seasons / a windfall composing / the floor it rots into.” Like the contrary word combinations seen before in “Kinship,” Heaney again plays with opposites, delivering roots that dream—something physical that tends downward is attributed with a quality that is airy and tends upwards.

Heaney also states that the weathers compose “the floor it rots into.” Like the poet, the land has the ability to compose—to write and determine the story of what came before it. As Tim Robinson argues, language is an inherent manifestation of nature, and thus its composition of history parallels that of the poet. Heaney describes the parallel between the poet and the land, writing: “I grew out of all this / like a weeping willow / inclined to / the appetites of gravity.” While the poet feeds on the material before him, he is pulled back towards the earth, like the roots pulled down, despite dreaming, or the weathers that venture from the heavens to the earth to compose and write what is beneath foot. Heaney describes this land—the bog—as the “vowel of earth,” giving it two roles:

the land itself composes, but as a vowel, it is part of the composition—of both the land and the poems.

The speaker in “Kinship” is like the bog bodies in that he is “inclined to / the appetites of gravity.” While he continually grows up and out of the bog, the bodies within remain and, like the weathers, compose the bog. As the bodies eventually comprise the bog, Heaney draws the necessary connection between Glob’s bogs in Denmark and his own in Ireland: “Taken in relation to the tradition of Irish political martyrdom for that cause whose icon is Kathleen Ni Houlihan, this is more than an archaic barbarous rite: it is an archetypal pattern.”⁴¹ While traditional characterizations of the two figures are polar opposites—Nerthus as rooted in the physical landscape, Kathleen as an airy nothing—the notion of the land as female and their positions as recipients of sacrifice link them.

The two figures are linked characteristically, but a wide temporal gap exists between the goddesses and their surrounding cultures. In the past, with religion literally rooted in the land—the goddess is the bog—there was a strong spiritual reverence for the land. Ample evidence for this appears in the Bog Poems about the sacrificial figures: “The Tollund Man,” “Bog Queen,” “Come to the Bower,” “The Grauballe Man,” “Punishment,” and “Strange Fruit.” Adversely, modern cultures are characterized in the poems as ruthless, destroying the land just to get to these sacrificed individuals. But the poet cannot be separated from this action. While he does not unearth the bodies himself, he needs the destruction of the land to form his art. Like the speaker of “Punishment,” who would have stood by silently as violence is enacted upon the victim, the poet stands by in silence as the land is violated. This complicates the position of the poet as one who

⁴¹ Heaney, Seamus. “Feeling into Words.” 57

acknowledges the destructive nature of man towards the land, and seems to sympathize with the land against it, yet he ignores his contribution to the destruction, needing it for his poetry.

The destructive nature of man to the land again calls to mind modern Northern Ireland, where the violence between Britain and Ireland parallels that between the turfcutters and the bog. Whereas before the violence was directed at the people, now the violence occurs towards people *and* directly to the land. The use of the turfcutter also complicates this reading, for though they could be read as representatives of the English, turfcutters are traditionally Irish. Here the poem suggests that the Irish mimick the hated destruction by the British, and perhaps behave no better towards the land than they portray the British. In "Bogland," Heaney hints at the duality of attitudes between the two who are at the bog, those within (bodies) and those without (turfcutters): "Our pioneers keep striking / Inwards and downwards, // Every layer they strip / Seems camped on before." Where one existed peacefully with the land—the campers—the other asserts dominance over the land through destruction—"striking inwards and downwards."

"The Digging Skeleton" and "Bog Queen" also pursue the contrast between historical reverence for and modern destruction of the land. Specifically, these poems manifest a disdain of historical bog people by the modern. In "The Digging Skeleton," the sacrificed figures are not permitted to "sleep in peace" as a "reward of faith"; instead "some traitor breath // Revives our clay." The modern turfcutter disturbs the slumber of a man who gave his life to the land—one who has literally become part of the land. Where the sacrificed body gives to the land, the turfcutter takes from the land. In "Bog Queen,"

Heaney shows a similar duality; turfcutters “robbed” the grave of the sacrificed queen and tore her from her sepulcher. While the Bog Queen speaks as a sacrifice whose domain has been disrupted, it parallels the disturbance turfcutters make to Nerthus’s domain, as they shred and tear away her layers. In one sense, it is a figural rape of the land, an image repeated in Part III of “Kinship.” The speaker rips apart the sealed land by raising a turf spade, “the shaft wettish / as I sunk it upright.”

Just as there is a genderization of the bog as female, the characters which perpetually destroy the land are male. The polarization asserts a negative dominance of human over the land and male over female. However, this polarization is not accepted in the poetry and the backlash against the destruction of the land shows in the response of the bog bodies towards the aggressors. As the poems suggest, when one complete landscape—a finished layer of place, objects, people—freezes in the bog, the individuals and objects are necessarily frozen too, and they literally become part of the land, part of a newly generated landscape. Thus, the disdainful voice of the old landscape rises in protest against modern destruction not only because of that landscape’s reverence for the land, but because people—voices—of a former landscape *are* the ground of this new modern landscape.

Heaney presents the body of the bog in a threefold manner—the bog is a body, the bog is comprised of bodies, and the bog/bodies are deities. It is only natural that both bodies have voices and require the means through which they may be transmitted. By means of a voice, each body tells its history and clarifies its story. The parallel between Nerthus and the bog blurs the line between the two, and the presence of the bog as a character is evident. However, as the next chapter suggests, the necessary voice of the

poet is subjective, and while reading the bodies and providing them voices, he also blurs the lines between history and mystery.

Chapter Four:
Speaking the Bog: Poet as Bard

Language, as a manifestation of culture, permeates the poetry of Heaney. “The Irish language,” writes Tim Robinson, in his essay “Listening to the Landscape,” is “an emanation of the land of Ireland.”⁴² As a traditionally oral language isolated by the island nature of its home, the Irish language escaped the weighted burden of movements that changed and set mainland languages—the Renaissance, Reformation, and Enlightenment. As a result, the Irish language remained primarily spoken and thus in a constant state of change; whereas the “enlightened” languages have become objectified, visual, and stilted—all because of their written nature. The “developed” language becomes more of the books than of the land.⁴³ Where the written word became a universally understood and accepted form of communication, the spoken Irish language remained with the people who spoke it, and the language, like the stories it told, was able to change with the culture, to adopt to its changing surroundings.

Robinson, like Heaney, asserts that the people are part of the land, and necessarily his “listening to the landscape has included listening to hundreds of farmers, housewives, fishermen, shopkeepers, and the odd professor of Irish, too.”⁴⁴ As modern ecocriticism suggests, a primary concern is the juxtaposition of nature and culture; here, Robinson notes, part of culture—language—is linked to the land, and, by definition, the people and their language become the landscape. Just as Robinson listens to the voices of those inhabiting the land, Heaney listens to the voices that inhabited the land and through his

⁴² Robinson, Tim. 152.

⁴³ *Ibid.* 152-154.

⁴⁴ *Ibid.* 155.

pen provides voices for them. Assuming the role of translator, Heaney also reads the land and objects and assigns them appropriate words, which become “bearers of history and mystery.”⁴⁵ Furthermore, the role of the poet as translator—making the stories accessible to the masses—lends to the role of the poet as bard. As suggested earlier, the poet delivers history and perpetuates mystery as he, or the reader, fills in the gaps between facts and the unknown.

To be the vessel for communication, the poet must first communicate with his subject. To do this, he reads the landscape—the land, the objects, the people. In “Viking Dublin: Trial Pieces” and “Bone Dreams,” Heaney uses the objects—the actual trial pieces and shards of bone—to function as doors to history and mystery. The objects are read and translated into the poet’s words, suggesting that the objects remind us of and help to understand history.

Objects, Heaney suggests in “Place, Pastness, Poems: A Triptych,” point to a past that is not “chronologically determined,” but instead “a dream time.”⁴⁶ Unlike Irish words that are spoken and remain subjective and in flux, objects are set and unchangeable. However, both objects and words act as doors to history and mystery, and functioning in the poetry, they reveal “a ramification of roots and associations and [look] forward to a clarification of sense and meaning.”⁴⁷ Heaney suggests the combined role of objects and words in “Kinship”: “This is the vowel of earth / dreaming its root / in flowers and snow // mutation of weathers / and seasons, / a windfall composing / the floor it rots into.” For Heaney, the bog and the objects that comprise it tend downward and clarify the past. Though they dream in roots, digging through the layers of the bog, the dream is of

⁴⁵ Heaney, Seamus. “Feeling into Words.” 45.

⁴⁶ Heaney, Seamus. “Place, Pastness, Poems: A Triptych.” 34.

⁴⁷ Heaney, Seamus. “Feeling into Words.” 52.

“flower and snow,” elements that were part of the past. As nature composes the story of the bog’s history, so do the words of the natural objects compose a history. Objects are a tangible link to the past; they illuminate history and shed some light on what the future may hold. Both the illumination of history and revelation of the future occur in the Bog Poems, for the objects bare evidence of violent sacrifice which Heaney sees repeated in modern Irish culture.

In “Viking Dublin: Trial Pieces,” the jaw-bone trial piece that the smith used for practice is covered with incisions “like a child’s tongue / following the toils / of his calligraphy.” Here, the object already has a written history literally embedded in its surface. The line has a life of its own, “eluding the hand / that fed it,” suggesting a separation between the author and his subject. And now, unearthed, the line invades the speaker’s hand and “enters my longhand.” This sort of automatic writing that comes replaces the written voice of the “ideal speaker”; rather than a person speaking through the poet, the object writes through the writer. As he translates the lines into words, the poet himself is transformed. The haunting writing that enters the speaker’s hand changes him: “I am Hamlet the Dane, / Skull-handler, parablist.” Through writing, the author-poet becomes a man of words, a position he achieves by handling objects. Significantly, Heaney, an Irish poet, becomes Hamlet, a Danish man of words. Recalling that Dane P.V. Glob’s stories were rooted in the Danish landscape, Heaney returns to that world, connecting Danish experiences and influences with the Irish. The flow of the line through the body and mind of the speaker floods him with haunting images of knowledge of the past that sits behind the words, as if the writer of the line—past writer or present writer—assumes the position of historical knowledge. The speaker’s tongue toils for

words that will flow from the skulls he handles, like the line that enters and leaves his hand.

In the final stanza of the poem, the speaker's "words lick around / cobbled quays, go hunting / lightly as pampooties / of his calligraphy." Here the words do not *become* what they represent to the reader, they are reminders. They merely "lick around" the places they mean to be and they "go hunting" for the experiences. Just as the translation of the object into words is an impossible task, Heaney does not attempt to claim that his chosen words transform into the object. Instead, he embraces a sort of poetic defeat, acknowledging that words can only suggest and never declare or assert identical encapsulation of a foreign form. Heaney reminds his readers that as bard-poet, appropriately set among the Bog Poems, he does not repeat the story exactly, but similarly. Using the words in the poem that "lick around" and "go hunting," so do the words in all of Heaney's poems, and so do the poems in response to the elements they strive to represent.

"Bone Dreams" also uses an object as a point of reference for both history and language. The "white bone found" offers a "rough porous / language of touch." This description paints language as tangible—it is "rough" to touch. The indication of language as "porous" suggests that it soaks up other influences, perhaps it can be filled, or perhaps it is porous because it has decomposed. The speaker touches and reads the bone, flings it "to strange fields" of England—slinging evidence of Irish history, inscribed on the bone, to an England that has infiltrated and adulterated the Irish language. Throughout his poetry, Heaney returns to a disdain for what English has done to the Irish language. He often contrasts Irish words, pairing them with necessary vowels (all words

need vowels), with the English words, associated with guttural consonants. While all of his poetry is in English, he inserts the Irish word when he can. One such proud example is in "Kinship" when he talks of the "Quagmire, swampland, morass," all English words for "bog"—an Irish word which has been adopted into the English vocabulary. Where land has been contested, "bog" is *literally* an Irish possession. As strife over land and cultural domination between the English and Irish continues into modern times, it is significant that the Irish can assert a sort of ownership over a part of the land through part of the culture—language.

In the "bone-house," a decomposed frame of a moment in Irish history in "Bone Dreams," sits "a skeleton / in the tongue's / old dungeons." The Irish oral tradition has dried up and sits useless trapped on the floor of the dungeon to which it does not belong. The speaker pushes "back / through dictions" that are distinctly English, making his way through "the ivied latins of / churchmen // to the scop's / twang" and discovers "the iron / flash of consonants / cleaving the line." Mentally journeying back through linguistic time, the speaker passes the echoing influences of the English language that invaded the Irish language to original progenitor of the English language: the scop, or English bard. The "iron / flash of consonants," ringing from the mouth of the scop, are "cleaving the line," a phrase that has multiple meanings. On one hand, "cleaving the line" may mean to divide, and the phrase refers to cutting through the Irish language, making room for the "dictions," "canopies," and "devices" that follow and shroud the Irish language. On the other hand, to cleave also means to hold together and the phrase calls to mind the adoption of English into the Irish culture—the words and their sounds stick with the people and to the land.

Just as the speaker pushes back through “dictions, / Elizabethan canopies. / Norman devices,” so does the reader push her way through the very words to reach the heart of the matter: the Irish language. In the cell, the speaker finds “*ban-hus*,” Gaelic for “bone-house,” amid “coffered / riches of grammar / and declensions.” The restricted language of the *ban-hus* is rich, despite its confinement to the contrasting bone-house. The speaker sees the former “fire” of the language and remnants of a soul who spoke it, a sharp contrast to the skeleton of the English bone-house, whose fire is absent. The speaker longs to “come back past / philology and kennings” and “re-enter memory / where the bone’s lair / is a love-nest / in the grass.” Just as Heaney digs into the bog for material, the speaker wants to dig back through the layers of language to find his memory of a language-landscape, the time when the Irish language was part of the landscape. The Irish language is obscured by “Elizabethan canopies” and over-intensive studies that detract from its literal roots in the land. Robinson would argue for a return to this same language, found more in the spoken word than the written. The speaker desires to “ossify” himself and return to the ground and an uncorrupted language. Similar to other Bog Poems, in which the female land is destroyed by a male turfcutter, so is the female Irish language (that of Kathleen Ni Houlihan) destroyed by a male Englishman, the representative scop.

While “Viking Dublin: Trial Pieces” and “Bone Dreams” speak to the use of objects to be translated into words, others such as “Bog Queen” allow the poet to “read” the bodies, and use his poetry as a vessel for the voices of the bodies. In “Bog Queen,” the speaker is a sacrificed queen whose “body was braille / for the creeping influences.” Use of Braille suggests two things: one, that the story is finished and written down to be

read, and two that what is written is meant for one who is blind, or at least, cannot see the bodies. This second note is appropriate because, after it is translated into poetry, the reader cannot see the bog or the bodies and also relies on his fingertips to read through the pages, as the poet relies on his fingertips to read the Braille.

The speaker describes the “illiterate roots” that navigated “the cavings / of stomach and socket.” Clearly, the Braille is intended for a human who can read it—not plants or animals. The “gemstones” of her “diadem” serve as Braille, too, physically telling the touching reader a story of her life. However, the words are idle to the “illiterate roots” that navigate her body. Thus, it is the responsibility of the poet to read the Braille and translate what is seen, and more importantly felt, back into words to be read by others. This action is an explicit example of the poet functioning as bard, taking a story of the land and communicating it to others. The written poem itself is a manifestation of the role as bard, who maintains culture through preservation of stories and history. Through his depiction of the Bog Queen, the poet can save a part of the culture before it changes or disappears.

The Bog Queen is “barbered / and stripped / by a turfcutter’s spade / who veiled me again,” suggesting that her excavation erased the words and silenced her by veil—the Braille, a language that needs to be felt, is smoldered by a physical covering. While in the bog, her story lives, for she has become part of the bog and can live within her *time-place-scape*. Out of the bog, she is without spoken words—she cannot speak—or written words—her Braille is covered. She remains unable to communicate except through another who lifts her veil to read her.

As the Bog Queen rises from the bog, she leaves the bog-womb that gives her life: “the plait of my hair / a slimy birth-cord / of bog, had been cut.” The history that is necessarily part of the bog becomes futile as it is detached from that which gives it life. The second to last stanza, closing with the word “cut,” literally cuts and separates the bog queen from her previous depiction and deflates her from a being with a body and thoughts to “hacked bone, skull-ware, / fayed stitches, tufts, / small gleams on the bank.” The body—the individual characterized by her own thoughts and voice that emerge in the poem—is reduced to a collection of merely physical objects. As the poem opens, the Bog Queen describes her identity in terms of her physical appearance, recognizable sensations of her environment, and her position as she “lay waiting” within that environment. She describes her knowledge of the “winter cold” and her skill that “hibernated / in the wet nest of my hair.”

The Bog Queen narrates her position, defined by the natural elements that blanket her body. As the turfcutter strips her of these layers, she loses her history and life as sacrifice. The action of the turfcutter dehumanizes the Bog Queen; she transforms from a thoughtful being to a lifeless body that has no more thoughts to offer, and is stopped from developing more, as she has been ripped from her life-giving home.

“Rescued” by the turfcutter, she rises naked, a smooth Braille-less body reduced to objectification and, through the poem, becomes words. The turfcutter breaks the Bog Queen from her “dream of Baltic amber” and tears her from the hibernation “in the wet nest of my hair,” from which her skull, as representative of her mind and thoughts, was “robbed.” The body begins as a collection of words—braille—and ends as a collection of

words—in print, selected by Heaney. As bard, poet Heaney hears, sees, and feels one set of words through the braille and then repeats it in his own distinct form.

Still, though the words “look forward to a clarification of sense and meaning,” they do not necessarily achieve it. On the contrary, the words that become the poems are subjective—they are *not* chosen by the bodies, but by the poet. While some hard facts reveal distinct history, other softer details skew the story, building a mystique around the bodies and creating a mystery. As bard, the poet is entitled to use his own words to tell his version of a story. A thousand bards may interpret the same story a thousand different ways. Thus, it is appropriate for the poet to build *his* story from a story.

As a bard could be identified by a distinctive style, so is Heaney identified through his distinctive style in the Bog Poems. With the exception of “Strange Fruit,” whose style matches that of a 14-line sonnet, but lacks standard meter, the remainder of the poems are comprised of 4-line stanzas, or quatrains, of anywhere from 5-9 syllables per line. While the lines lack uniformity in meter, they all utilize enjambment, leading the reader to speak the lines as a story would be told. While this is characteristic of Heaney’s writing and reading style, it is especially significant for identification of the poet as a bard figure. The poems are written, but read aloud, they flow as solemn anecdotes from a traveler.

Inspired by foreign bogs and bog bodies, the poet successfully brings and relates one story to another—the Danish and the Irish. And as a series of stories come with one bard, so does this series of Bog Poems come with one poet. Using distinct style, and elements of Irish language to make the stories his own, or at least Irish, Heaney as poet transforms into a sort of bard figure, who navigates the bog to find material for his works.

As the bard travels throughout a certain domain, so does Heaney use a certain domain—the bog—to color his stories. Giving voice to Irish culture, history, and bodies, the Bog Poems serve as a record of the poet's word, just as the bogs also aid in the preservation of each element.

Conclusion

Guided by theories of ecocriticism, this thesis examines the Bog Poems under the assumption that the land is directly linked with the culture. Heaney's treatment of the land illustrates that he sees the bog at the centre of the Irish culture and of his own poetry—the “wet centre” he describes in “Bogland.” The bog does not simply serve as a location for the poetry, a place from which the inspiration came and the poems resulted. In the Bog Poems, the bog distinguishes Irish identity, preserves Irish history, functions as an object and body Heaney connects to universal patterns, and serves as vessel through which the poet becomes a bard. Heaney recognizes the importance of the bog within Irish culture as an emblem *of* the culture.

As poet, Heaney represents his interpretation of the bog—what it means to Ireland and how it functions in the culture of then and now. In his first Bog Poem “Bogland,” Heaney speaks for all of Ireland, stating “We have no prairies / To slice a big sun at evening.” His first discussion of the bog declares it the emblem of Irish culture, the distinctive landscape that fills the mind's eye when picturing Ireland. He establishes that the bog serves as a sort of history bank, filled with items such as the “Great Irish Elk,” and Irish bog-butter, objects that remind the reader of an Ireland that extends indefinitely into the past, as “Our pioneers keep striking / Inwards and downwards” to the “bottomless” “wet centre.”

But how is Heaney himself implicated in the poetry? In “Bogland,” he gives voice to the “we” of Ireland, making a declaration for all the country. But, in the remainder of the Bog Poems, there is no “we,” and the land about which he writes he has

seen in books, at most. Moreover, the bodies he describes are not even of Ireland—they are of the distant Denmark. While Heaney asserts that a connection lies in the characterization of the two lands as female (the goddess Nerthus of Denmark and Kathleen Ni Houlihan that is Ireland), and the sacrifice to each, how does this give Ireland identity, as opposed to simply making it part of a pattern?

John Bayley responds to this when he writes that Heaney's poetry "is continuously aware that it does not live in its own area of discourse, but only visits it."⁴⁸ This is true of the Bog Poems. While the specifics about which Heaney writes are essentially unconnected with Ireland, they do establish a pattern to which Heaney alludes and "visits" in order to substantiate points he wishes to make about Ireland and its bog culture. In "The Tollund Man," Heaney writes of a desired visit to Aarhus, where he can see the said body. He closes that "Out there in Jutland / In the old man-killing parishes / I will feel lost, / Unhappy and at home." In the "man-killing parishes," like his own Northern Ireland to which he compares the violence and sacrifice, the poet will feel "at home," albeit "lost, / Unhappy." Visiting those "man-killing parishes," Heaney is reminded of the nature of his own home and the poem transforms from one of telling to one of revealing.

The revelation is personal for Heaney. Especially in "Punishment" and "Kinship," Heaney writes in the first-person to suggest his proximity to his subject. In "Punishment," Heaney expresses his emotion for the situation that he imagines surrounds one of the bog bodies. Consider a case of death in which the mourners who establish the tone of the situation. Here, Heaney's expression of sympathy for the dead and empathy

⁴⁸ Bayley, John. "Living In and Living Out: The Poet's Location for the Poetry." (*Agenda*, 27:1, 1998) 32.

for the mourners establishes the tone of the poem. It is his reaction to the violence that makes the poem personal and Irish. The “intimate revenge” of death in the poem which Heaney relates to punishments in modern Northern Ireland is what the poem considers. Besides the actual killing, the poem concerns itself with the motivation for that “revenge,” and the personal reaction of the others, the ones who stood by and “cast, I know, / the stones of silence.” Placing himself as speaker, Heaney’s words can be read in two ways: he knows he would have reacted as an “artful voyeur” in the situation of the past, and he recognizes that he does act as the “artful voyeur” in the present. The shame he feels for standing by, “almost” loving the victim, translates to his shame for standing by, “almost” loving those who are hurt in modern Ireland. “Punishment” expresses a guilt felt by Heaney, perhaps as representative of other Irishmen who also stood by, that seems to repeat in history, but is not excused.

A different sort of revelation occurs in “Kinship,” in which Heaney returns to the Irish bog and describes the violence that infects its land and leaves “old crannog / piled by the fearful dead: a desolate peace.” Having departed from Ireland in the previous Bog Poems, Heaney comes “back to this / ‘island of the ocean’ / where nothing will suffice.” He prays to Tacitus to “Read the inhumed faces // of casualty and victim; report us fairly, how we slaughter / for the common good.” Moving from “Bogland,” which praises the landscape, to the bog-body poems, which describe and relate the violence to modern injustices, this poem returns Heaney to his real home of Ireland, where he directly addresses the violence of his homeland. The use of the Danish bog prompts Heaney to consider his country’s own bogs, and this final Part of “Kinship” illustrates the relevance

of Ireland, and how for Heaney, Ireland stands apart. Violence and death, like that in "Punishment," becomes personal, and not simply a pattern.

Thus, the bog serves as a centre in the Bog Poems and in Irish culture. Like its complicated description, encompassing opposites as "Earth-pantry, bone-vault, / sun-bank, embalmer," the bog of which Heaney writes encompasses all aspects of Irish culture, from the pastoral descriptions of "Bogland" to the final and most explicit association of violence in "Kinship." The centre serves as both the "memory of the landscape" and the landscape, bringing together the past and future. More than serving as simply the peripheral place of the poetry, the bog *is* the poetry. Heaney borrows from it for his own creations. As a poet living amidst the bogs, Heaney's poetry makes him a bard, telling the stories through his written words. And through those stories, through the poems he writes, the careful reader can see that they are about much more than a collection of bodies and objects. They are a collection of history and mystery, nature and culture, opposites that are inseparable and found together, as Heaney finds them, in the bog.

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